

Low Desert Pruning Guide for Commonly Used Shrubs

Use the following tables as a guideline to determine the right time to prune for many common shrubs. Most plants will do their best if allowed to grow to their natural form and shape. Shearing and excessive pruning compromises the vigor and health of the plant, reduces blooming, and may shorten the life of the plant. Remember: Every time you shear a plant, you create wounds that stress the plant, requiring additional energy and water for the plant to recover.

Fall and Winter Pruning (October through January)

Green thumb tip for fall/winter pruning: Do not prune any frost sensitive plants (the table on Pruning of Frost damaged provides examples of frost sensitive plants) at this time. The upper branches and foliage will help insulate the lower branches so that less frost damage occurs.

Common Name	Scientific Name	Blooming Season	Pruning
Texas Sage Violet Silverleaf (or “Cloud” series) Chihuahuan Sage	<i>Leucophyllum frutescens</i> <i>L. candidum</i> <i>L. laevigatum</i>	Summer and fall	No pruning required if selected for the appropriate space. If needed, 2-step or renewal pruning is recommended in late winter or very early spring. Don’t shear.
Silver Dalea Black Dalea Trailing Dalea Yellow Bush Dalea Bush Dalea	<i>Dalea bicolor</i> <i>D. frutescens</i> <i>D. greggii</i> <i>D. lutea</i> <i>D. pulchra</i>	Fall Late summer and fall Late fall	Prune vigorous species by renewal pruning of one third to one half in early fall.
Pink Muhly Grass Deer Grass Mexican Thread Grass	<i>Muhlenbergia capillaris</i> <i>Muhlenbergia rigens</i> <i>Stipa tenuissima</i>	Flowers spikes occur fall through winter	Cut back 6 inches from ground in late winter. It is better to cut flat or parallel to the ground than to make a rounded cut.
Chaparral Sage Autumn Sage Mexican Bush Sage	<i>Salvia. clevelandii</i> <i>S. greggii</i> <i>S. leucantha</i>	Spring, or spring through summer.	Cut back old stems in winter or early spring. Deadhead spent flower stems. If needed, renewal pruning in early fall for <i>clevelandii</i> and <i>greggii</i> ; in the winter for <i>leucantha</i> .

Pruning of Frost Damaged Plants – late February through March after any chance of frost

Green thumb tips for pruning frost damaged plants: “The mesquite trees do not lie” is a good method to determine if the danger of frost is over for the season. The leafing out of the mesquite trees (when the green buds open) is typically a good indication that the danger of frost is over. In the Phoenix area this typically occurs in late February or early March.

Common Name	Scientific Name	Blooming Season	Pruning
Bougainvillea	<i>Bougainvillea sp.</i>	Spring through fall	Severe renewal pruning to remove dead wood or frost damage in early Feb.- March. Remove offshoots or vigorous growth as needed.
Lantana	<i>Lantana spp.</i>	Spring through fall.	Renewal pruning - Can be cut to ground in March to remove frost-damaged wood. Can prune during growing season to control shape, if necessary.
Natal Plum	<i>Carissa grandiflora</i>	Flowers on new growth in early summer.	Renewal pruning of dead wood or frost damage in early Feb.- March. Remove offshoots or vigorous growth as needed using 2-Step method. Avoid shearing.
Chuparosa Mexican Honeysuckle	<i>Justicia californica</i> <i>J. spicigera</i>	Spring and intermittent during summer and fall.	Little to no pruning needed. Remove old woody stems to rejuvenate. Light pruning after spring if desired.
Red Bird of Paradise Desert Bird of Paradise Mexican Bird of Paradise	<i>Caesalpinia pulcherrima</i> <i>C. gilliesii</i> <i>C. mexicana</i>	Late spring to fall. Leaf drop and some die back will naturally occur in the winter.	If needed, major renewal pruning is done in late winter, early spring. If stems are twiggy, cut <i>C. pulcherrima</i> to 6-12" above ground in late Feb. after chance of frost.

Spring Pruning (April through mid June)

Green thumb tips for spring pruning: If flowers are produced on the previous season's growth so that the plant blooms in the early spring, then any needed pruning should be done after they bloom (example: Brittle Bush and Chuparosa)

If a shrub blooms on tissue that is produced during the current season's growth (i.e. usually blooming later in the spring or during the summer and early fall) then any needed pruning should be done before May and, if they are not frost sensitive, as early as February (example: Texas Sage).

Common Name	Scientific Name	Blooming Season	Pruning
Baja Fairy Duster Pink Fairy Duster	<i>Calliandra californica</i> <i>C. eriophylla</i>	Spring to fall	Light, 2-step pruning (if needed) in late spring after first flowering. Don't shear. Avoid over-watering which causes excessive growth.
Oleander	<i>Nerium oleander</i>	Late spring to fall.	2-step pruning in spring/early summer or after bloom, remove old wood. Don't shear.
Trailing Rosemary	<i>Rosemarinus officinalis</i> 'Prostrata'	Early spring	Light pruning after flowering in spring to control shape or cut back to woody stems to rejuvenate.
Yellow Bells Orange Bells	<i>Tecoma stans</i> <i>Tecoma</i> hybrid	Spring to fall	Prune dead wood in early spring, otherwise light pruning as needed.
Brittlebush	<i>Encelia farinosa</i>	Spring	Trim tall flower stems down to leaves after flowering. Avoid over-watering which causes excessive growth.
Feathery Cassia Green Cassia Silvery Cassia	<i>Cassia artemisioides</i> <i>C. nemophila</i> <i>C. phyllodenia</i>	Late winter to spring.	No pruning required if selected for the appropriate space. If necessary, 2-step prune after flowering while temperatures are still cool.
Chuparosa	<i>Justica californica</i>	Late winter to spring	If needed, prune after blooming.

General Tips on When to Prune Trees / Shrubs

The following table provides optimal pruning times. Very light pruning can be done anytime if proper pruning techniques are followed. Remember to follow the tips for proper pruning and do not remove more than 25 percent of the live branches and leaves annually.

Plant	When to Prune
Native trees	Early summer (May – early June)
Non-native deciduous trees	During winter dormancy (January)
Non-native Evergreen trees	March
Citrus	Usually not needed, March if necessary
Conifers (pines, junipers, cypress)	During winter dormancy (January)
Spring-blooming shrubs	After bloom is finished
Summer-blooming shrubs	During winter dormancy

General Pruning Tips for Other Plants

Common name	Scientific name	Pruning Tips
Agave	<i>Agave spp.</i>	Pruning only considered after a severe frost. Otherwise avoid pruning. Do not prune into a pineapple shape. Pruning wounds often lead to pest infestations. Note: most Agave species will die after blooming.
Ocotillo	<i>Fouquieria splendens</i>	Do not prune. Plant in an area that will accommodate mature size.
Red or yellow yucca	<i>Hesperaloe parviflora</i>	Avoid all pruning or shearing. Dried flower stalks can be removed.
Yucca	<i>Yucca spp.</i>	Avoid all pruning or shearing. Dry, old leaves can be “peeled” on some species of yucca. Can remove old flower stalks after blooming.
Desert Spoon	<i>Dasyllirion wheeleri</i>	
Mexican Blue Palm	<i>Brahea armata</i>	Cut dry or dead fronds. Do not above a 45 degree angle or cut the new green growth from the center.
Mediterranean Fan Palm	<i>Chamaerops humilis</i>	
Prickly Pear	<i>Opuntia spp.</i>	Plant in an area that will accommodate mature size. If needed, make pruning cuts at the joints.

References

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